

Lessons Learned from Idaho's Instructional Improvement System: Executive Summary

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The State of Idaho and the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation (JKAF) have made considerable investments in Idaho's education, technology, and data systems to better serve students. One key JKAF investment has been in Schoolnet, an Instructional Improvement System (IIS) designed to make data and other resources easily accessible and useable by teachers to directly impact classroom instruction, school decision-making, and ultimately student success.

The Idaho State Department of Education (SDE) was awarded a grant from the U.S. Department of Education for approximately \$6 million in 2009 to develop a Statewide Longitudinal Data System (SLDS). To ensure the system was of use to Idaho's schools and school districts, JKAF granted \$21 million in additional funding to SDE to link an IIS to Idaho's SLDS, which is known as the Idaho System for Educational Excellence (ISEE).

This *Lessons Learned* Executive Summary from the Institute for Evidence-Based Change (IEBC) provides insights from the field about Idaho's experience in the IIS pilot and the state's new direction with the project. The report is based upon feedback from numerous educators' across the state gathered through IEBC's comprehensive review of Schoolnet implementation in spring 2013. This review included interviews and a teacher survey at multiple districts using Schoolnet, as well as interviews with individuals responsible for Schoolnet development and implementation at SDE and Pearson—the company that runs Schoolnet. The report is also based upon IEBC's follow-up facilitation between SDE and Pearson from August 2013 to April 2014 and interviews with school districts conducted by JKAF staff in spring 2014.

What happened?

Through a competitive proposal process, SDE selected Schoolnet as its IIS. Selection committee participants noted that Schoolnet was far and away the most comprehensive and developed system available at the time, especially noting the importance of lesson planning and assessment functions. SDE and Pearson have been working to develop and rollout Schoolnet in the state over the last three years, and they have struggled to meet the expectations and needs of Idaho educators.

Idaho educators and stakeholders described several key implementation challenges:

- This large effort represented Pearson's first foray into implementing the Schoolnet platform at the state level for use by all districts. Prior to this effort, Schoolnet linked only to district student information systems. Many educators in the field believe SDE and Pearson did not fully appreciate the complexity of the project at the outset, set too high expectations, and did not anticipate

challenges well. Many teachers and administrators reported frustrations with resulting product delays and inaccuracies.

- Many educators reported that they couldn't use the IIS because of poor data quality and timeliness of the data. These data challenges also were related to ISEE —users see these systems as one and the same. SDE and Pearson put a lot of effort into strengthening the data flow into Schoolnet and making it more efficient during the 2013-14 academic year.
- Although SDE selected pilot districts, it requested that Pearson roll out Schoolnet to all Idaho districts immediately during the “pilot” phase. This statewide roll-out precluded the opportunity to ensure problems were addressed prior to introducing the IIS statewide. Additionally, districts that received pilot grants reported that they did not have enough time to properly integrate this resource and train their teachers to use it effectively.
- This project lacked strong communications to and from the field to explain progress or assess district needs. Many districts reported that SDE did not understand their needs, especially related to professional development and technical assistance. This perception was further amplified as the districts believed SDE staff had limited experience in teaching and learning, and respondents noted that available professional development resources, such as ISEE navigators, were largely ineffective.
- Another factor in the troubled roll-out was the focus by SDE on making Schoolnet into a “digital backpack.” The digital backpack is supposed to be a collection of significant data about each student, including demographics, enrollment information, test results, interventions, attendance, report card grades, and teacher notes. While easy to describe, a digital backpack is difficult to build and implement, even more so when a SLDS is capturing information from multiple student information systems, only select SLDS data would be used for the digital backpack, and data represent different time frames and require different types of validation.

Course Correction

In response to the documented frustrations in the field, JKAF asked IEBC to conduct an independent review of the Schoolnet project in spring 2013. Findings noted several deficiencies and challenges described above. The report also identified action steps to address these challenges to right the ailing—but salvageable—Schoolnet implementation. Thereafter, JKAF asked IEBC to consult with SDE and Pearson teams to course correct the project with attention to the identified critical areas.

SDE and Pearson met in August 2013 to discuss next steps and focus on improving their tumultuous working relationship for the good of the project. Over the next seven months, the teams successfully worked to improve the Schoolnet experience for users. SDE and Pearson prioritized data quality and timeliness as a key to improving the end user concerns with Schoolnet.

The teams focused on improving the teacher experience — a strategic move that set high priority for changes that would have the greatest impact on classroom instruction and student learning; leading, in turn, to increased buy-in. Specific changes included the Five File Format data submission (which could manage nightly uploads instead of monthly) to improve data relevancy and a pilot to directly connect

Schoolnet to a district's student information system (instead of to ISEE) to improve data quality and timeliness. Further, for a brief period, it seemed that SDE was prioritizing leadership with a teaching and instructional background. However, with the Deputy Superintendent's resignation, that perspective was again absent from the SDE team.

Over the last seven months, Pearson engaged its senior leadership, came to the table to problem solve major challenges, and made authentic efforts, often beyond the project scope, to get the project back on track and in a place to make meaningful differences for teachers.

Several success stories about Schoolnet use in Idaho have emerged from the field during this course correction. More educators are accessing the tool, and anecdotal stories about use show some educators are finding value—by saving them time and informing their teaching. Despite these findings, the clock is ticking on the pilot and many educators have still not appreciated the benefits of the IIS.

Lessons Learned

Final reflections about the Schoolnet pilot offer important lessons learned from the project.

- Districts value an IIS platform. While educators reported their frustration about Schoolnet implementation, almost universally, they want an IIS to inform their work. As one superintendent stated, "I have to have an IIS in this district. If we didn't have an IIS, it would be like a ship without GPS, radar, or steering mechanism. We are making this work now and don't want to go back."
- The one-way SLDS to IIS data connection is complex and challenging, and plans to link any IIS to an SLDS should account for this complexity in a realistic approach and timeline.
- To successfully implement an IIS, a high degree of understanding of district needs about how the system should work, its content, and also professional development is necessary. All districts would benefit from a needs assessment to understand what supports are required for implementation and what type of professional development (e.g., content and delivery method) would best meet their needs.
- Successful IIS implementation needs strong leadership from a managing partner that accepts leadership responsibilities, understands its strengths and limitations, is able to evaluate and prioritize with a lens on teaching and learning, addresses staffing gaps, and leverages key partners to fill areas of need. Further, while the focus of a digital backpack is an important goal, it should not conflict with how the IIS supports the needs of teachers in the classroom.
- Staying true to an IIS pilot plan is important to ensure districts get the resources they need, problems can first be fixed on a small scale, and early successes can quell fear of change typically encountered with a new initiative. Instead of setting up a system of haves and have-nots, a pilot would avoid wasting resources everywhere on a system that is yet to be fully developed.
- A statewide IIS implementation needs a strong communications plan that will explain the status of the project and highlight key successes, as well as solicit feedback from districts.

Where do we go from here?

Recent positive developments in implementation have been largely overshadowed by earlier missteps and puzzling future plans. Based on project history, it appears that SDE may be overestimating its capacity to manage this system, and districts that have invested their time and resources into this IIS may be further frustrated after the pilot concludes and as SDE begins to self-host this platform.

SDE has begun to operate and maintain the Schoolnet platform on its own servers. It expects to operate the IIS successfully, meeting district needs, without support from Pearson. SDE purchased a perpetual license to Schoolnet, so legally SDE has the right to self-host this application on its own hardware—but, given what has been learned, it may not be in the user’s best interest to do so. As the feedback indicates, SDE has underestimated the leadership and technical needs of this project, and their intention to continue without basic support from Pearson may be shortsighted. SDE will host a stagnant version of Schoolnet that will not receive automated upgrades because the contract with Pearson was not renewed.

Moving forward, there are other concerns about SDE’s IIS-ISEE link. Recently, the Idaho legislature adopted language that is undefined and perplexing. As explained by SDE staff, they expect all Idaho IISs (whether Schoolnet or any other system) to “interface” with ISEE, meaning that they must pull data from ISEE and also push data into it.

The implications of this new SDE requirement are confounding. First, no IIS currently has this functionality and ISEE is not currently configured to allow for it. This would be yet another component of an already very complex, unwieldy system. Further, this approach has not been tested, yet it is the likely path SDE will require of districts when integrating an IIS to ISEE. Therefore, if a district would like to use state dollars to invest in its own IIS, either Schoolnet or another system, it is expected that the system will have this functionality. Alternatively, districts can use SDE’s static version of Schoolnet that will not receive updates and is no longer supported by the developer. These options are complicating a system that has already struggled to fulfill the potential of a linked IIS and SLDS that yields the desired improvements in teaching and learning.

While JKAF has expressed overwhelming appreciation for the district involvement in the Schoolnet implementation, it is frustrated with the final outcomes and the plan for the future of Schoolnet as a resource for all Idaho school districts, schools, teachers and students. JKAF acknowledges there are several districts finding some value in Schoolnet, and JKAF plans limited support in the final months to provide for the last planned upgrades to the system. However, JKAF is committed to improving the educational outcomes for all students, and will be actively pursuing strategies to support the quality of teaching and learning through technology and data efforts, directly and through their funded partners.

For additional information, please see:

Institute for Evidence-Based Change (IEBC). (May 2013) *A Review of Idaho’s Instructional Improvement Systems*. Executive Summary is retrieved online on May 13, 2014 at <http://bit.ly/1oMiCi8>